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IS GRAMMAR USELESS?

BY WALTER GUEST KELLOGG

THE study of English in our schools is today receiving so much attention and is recognized as of such vital importance that it is well to ascertain whether the system of teaching it is all that it should be. So many different subjects must be taught that it is axiomatic that no time, no energy should be wasted and that no subject should encumber our curriculums which is not necessary in itself nor adapted to the special needs of the students who desire it. In an age when so much stress is laid, not merely upon the studies with which those of an older day were familiar, but upon extensions and refinements of those studies, it is prudent occasionally to "take stock", so to speak, and to inquire whether we are not carrying upon our shelves shop-worn goods which had better be relegated to our lumber room, thus to make way for other materials more appropriate to the needs and demands of our customers.

English grammar, as it is commonly taught, presents itself as Exhibit A. There may be other exhibits, but certainly none can be more damaging to the cause of popular education than this unneeded, unscholarly excrescence which has persisted so many, many years, informing no one, occupying time and effort that could be more profitably employed, and justifying itself only from the point of view of the publishers who publish and the men and women who write the hundred and one books yearly under the name of English Grammar.

Sir Philip Sidney in his *Apologie for Poetrie* put the case in a nutshell when he wrote:

I know, some will say it (i. e. English) is a mingled language. And why not so much the better, taking the best of both the other? Another will say it wanteth Grammer. Nay truly, it hath that prayse, that it wanteth not Grammer: for Grammer it might have, but it needes it not; being so easie of itselfe, and so voyd of those cumbersome differ-

ences of Cases, Genders, Moodes, and Tenses, which I thinke was a peece of the Tower of Babilon's curse, that a man should be put to schoole to learne his mother tongue.

If we are to learn Italian, Greek, Spanish or any other alien language, grammar is essential, unless we are to learn it in Italy, Greece, Spain or in an environment in which that language is the mother tongue, or the language commonly and generally spoken. In the United States, if we desire to speak Latin, we must have other canons to go by than the canon of usage, and a grammar will be of service; if, however, we are to learn English, we can best learn it from the common speech of the people about us.

A child speaks English that is quite sufficient for his purposes long before he attains school age, and constantly, without being formally taught, adds to his vocabulary words that he knows are the symbols for the thing he wants, and, as he grows, as his needs multiply, so his stock of words increases. Long before he enters a class-room, his capacity for understanding and for making himself understood in idiomatic English is marvelous.

The greatest writers of whom England can boast acquired English as the child acquires it, by use. Shakespeare, during the six years which comprehended his schooling, never saw nor heard of an English Grammar, nor did Sidney, Marlowe, Spenser, Milton and a host of later writers. The Grammar Schools of Shakespeare's time were Latin schools, the grammar taught was Latin grammar and it was taught in Latin. The first grammar of English did not appear until nearly a decade after Shakespeare had left Stratford to begin his career in London—and it was written in Latin. Shakespeare learned English by reading and speaking English and by hearing English spoken.

It would very probably have occurred to no one to write and publish an English Grammar had it not first occurred to a certain Dionysius Thrax to write and publish a Greek Grammar. The author of the Greek Grammar wrote it in order that Roman boys and girls might become conversant with Greek; it is quite possible that he would have laughed at the idea of a Greek Grammar for the youths of Athens. Yet, if Greek had a grammar, Latin must have a grammar and English, bound to keep in the

running, must have one. The fallacy persists; our grammars, appropriate for the foreign markets, unfortunately are believed to have been intended for home consumption. Why an American boy or girl should study English grammar when Shakespeare and Milton were successful in getting a fair hold on the language without it, and by means open to any boy or girl, is a mystery that not even time will solve.

It may be doubted if there exists such a thing today as English Grammar, as this subject is commonly understood and commonly taught. English, like Latin, Greek and German, was once a highly inflected language. During its passage down the years, it lost many of the formal characteristics so dear to the heart of the grammarian and it has emerged a vastly simple, rugged and uninflected form of expression. In losing much, it has gained immeasurably.

In the middle period in the history of a majority of tongues, inflection of case, tense, number, gender, etc., occupied altogether too prominent a place. As a means of denoting the relation of words in a sentence, it obtruded unduly upon the hearer's attention and served by its overelaboration and its variety of aspect to obscure the meaning which it purported to convey, exactly as excessive ornamentation obscures the effect of a painting or a piece of architecture. In their later periods, these languages gradually dropped many of their inflected forms, and the trend everywhere has since been toward a greater simplicity, toward a minimum of variants.

This tendency has been particularly noteworthy in the development of English where what is known as analysis has in great part superseded inflection. In Latin, for instance, *amo* is "I love," but "I loved" is *amabam*, and "I have loved" is *amavi*. If we would convey the notion expressed to a Roman by *amavi*, we do it by analysing or breaking up the conception of *amavi* into its component parts and write the three words: "I have loved". The constant recurrence with us of the prepositions "for," "to," "of" and "by," instead of case forms, and of the auxiliary verbs "have," "will," "shall," "be" and "do," instead of complex verb forms, is an illustration of the make-shifts we have adopted to avoid the complications of conjugation and declension.

Our adjectives, our possessive pronouns, and our articles

no longer must be made to agree with their nouns—indeed they simply cannot be made to agree with them. We have one uninflected form of adjective and it functions perfectly with all nouns. Similarly, our possessive pronouns are interchangeable and we can say “my hat and shoes” and signify precisely the same idea as the Frenchman inflects into his *mon chapeau et mes souliers*. And the French must say *mon chapeau* instead of *ma chapeau* simply because “hat” in French happens to be masculine.

We have in our nouns no vocative case, no nominative, no dative, no ablative case. Where the Romans inflected their nouns by declension, we say “Charles, what is it? Charles is a naughty boy. He hit Charles. He gave the ball to Charles. He sat with Charles”, and Charles in every instance bears all the outward and visible signs of the original Charles and appears quite unaware that he has been used in five different cases. He has been spared the humiliation of being successively Carole, Carolus, Carolum, Carolo and again Carole, as the Latin would have had him, and persists throughout as Charles, pure and simple. We may, of course, say Charles is in the vocative case because he is addressed and later in the accusative case because he happens to be hit, but assuredly he has not changed a bit and there would seem little reason in having to study about it in the dull pages of a grammar.

The possessive case is still inflectional: “Tom” becomes “Tom’s”. The added s and the apostrophe are all that are left of declension; to form the plural we drop the apostrophe and add the s to the singular. The instances in which the plural is otherwise formed may be learned in half an hour.

In the verb, we can scarcely discern the few inflectional remnants of mood, tense, number and person. I, you, we, or they love, but he, she or it loves; I, you, we or they have; he, she or it has. The same verb may be indicative or imperative; the context, the tone of voice must determine in which sense it is used. The subjunctive has all but completely disappeared. We denote passivity not by a voice form, but analytically with the help of the auxiliary: “I am loved”, “I am hated”.

Did we possess the intricate and illogical genders of Latin, French and German, the grammarian’s lot would be happier. Almost alone among the languages of the world,

English (except in pronouns of the third person) has no grammatical gender. To paraphrase Buttercup, "things *are* what they seem"; gender corresponds with physical fact. If the sex is masculine or feminine, the gender accordingly is masculine or feminine; if the object is without sex or we choose to regard it without reference to its sex, it is neuter. Why *hortus*, garden, should be masculine, and *manus*, hand, should be feminine, has puzzled as many students of Latin as the masculine *crayon*, pencil, and the feminine *île*, island, have bewildered as many students of French.

Grammar must be one of two things. It is either the study that engaged us so wearily in our younger days with its conjugations, comparisons and declensions, or it is, as Professor Barrett Wendell defines it, "this system of good use which tells us how we may compose words in sentences. . . . In English," he says, "good use in composition is a question chiefly of good sense; I have yet to find a sentence that makes good sense—and anybody who knows what words mean can tell, with a little thought, whether a sentence makes good sense or not—that is not good English."

English Grammar, as it is taught today, is a mixture, a conglomerate of both notions, with the emphasis rather on the first. It is a thing of laws, rules, ordinances, by-laws and exceptions; an unscientific, illogical, inflexible dictum which emphasizes the letter and not the spirit, which forces children to decline nouns in cases which do not exist, to conjugate verbs in tenses, moods and voices which long since have ceased to be and to make adjectives agree with nouns when agreement is neither necessary nor possible. A child may conjugate and parse and "diagram" until the crack of doom and never, unless he hears good English and reads good English, will he be one inch nearer the goal—the correct and idiomatic use of his mother tongue.

English Grammar, as it is now taught, should be dropped entirely from our schools. A child need never parse nor "diagram" an English sentence, conjugate an English verb, nor decline an English noun. Indeed, it would do little harm if all the English Grammars adapted for use in elementary schools were to be committed to a

bonfire. We should then be in a fair way to begin anew.

The teacher is the crux of the problem.

The greater part of the work of instruction will continue to fall upon the teacher of English, but correct use should be taught on every day, in every school, and in every class. No recitation in physiology, for example, however satisfying it may be according to the standards of physiology, should go unchallenged if it is faulty in its English. Nor should any written paper in any subject be allowed to pass muster if its English is incorrect.

Its importance should be impressed upon all pupils. It should be made plain to them that a knowledge of other things may be desirable, but that cultural and commercial opportunity depends, in great part, upon one's knowledge of his mother tongue, and that, first and foremost, the work of the school is to be centered upon attaining a correct use of idiomatic English.

The errors commonly made in every-day speech are, upon reflection, few in number and are the result of carelessness rather than ignorance. The speaker, if his attention be called to his mistakes, can usually correct himself.

Much of the English of today is objectionable not because it is ungrammatical, but because it is half-baked. It is the clumsy expression of a thought never completely realized—an attempt to express a conception never more than half conceived. The sentences that do not mean what they say or do not say what they are intended to mean, are quite as common as the sentences that are improperly phrased. The remedy is to be sought in clearer, straighter thinking.

No more valuable aid can be found than the writing of daily themes. These daily themes will quicken marvelously the student's powers of observation, enlarge his vocabulary, and, in his quest of material, will broaden his sympathies and appreciations.

If the teacher is chosen for his knowledge and use of English, if English is held up to our students as a fundamental, and if it is taught in all our classes, then there will be no place for so-called English Grammar, and the hours at present devoted to it may well be given to some other subject. It is obvious that we are speaking here of English Grammar in the elementary and secondary schools. The history and the process of growth of our language will

always be studied and should always be studied in our colleges and universities by those who desire such specialization.

In New York State the truth was seen years ago, but in practice it has been only half realized. Much less time is now spent on English Grammar, but we still are devoting too much daylight to it. The syllabus prepared by the Department of Education recommends that no formal grammar be taught until the sixth grade is attained, but one wonders why it is still permitted to be taught at all. In one city, whose educational standards are ranked high, the local authorities have prepared for children of thirteen a syllabus which comprehends many strange and wonderful terms. I quote some of them: "attributive complement, predicate adjective, compound predicate, compound object." What do they all mean? Who but the grammarian or the pupil in the sixth, seventh, or eighth grade can say? Years and years ago we forgot their meaning; their very sound, however, evokes our youth, for we, too, heard those self-same words or words like them; once they stood for something and we were quite serious about them. Today, they find us cold and unresponsive—they are but shells, husks, dead words and no sense abides in them. We perceived that we had no use for them, that they served no purpose for us, and so, long since, they passed into the limbo. And a hundred times a day you or I or the boy in the fifth grade (who never has studied Grammar) may use an attributive complement (and do it very nicely, too), and yet be totally unaware of it.

Usage is the standard, and by usage must English be taught. No grammar nor dictionary can lay down the law nor have the effect of a statute; they can only record what passes current among the people of the time and can only preserve the customs of today and the precedents of yesterday, as do the common-law reports. English always will be in a state of flux, of evolution, until the day comes when it shall be fixed and stable and governed by exact and arbitrary rules; on that day, there may be a place, perhaps, for English Grammar, as it is now taught, but on that day English, as we know it and love it, will be dead.

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